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This present study was intended to investigate the international students' perceptions of the roles of tutors in Australia universities. Cultural issues are important in defining the roles of tutors and international students studying in Australia may have different perceptions of the appropriate roles of tutors at tertiary level.

Teaching is complex cultural activity. Therefore, tutors and students need to understand each other within the socio-cultural contexts that have shaped their attitudes. It is suggested to tutors who are working with culturally mixed population that they not act exclusive as facilitator but occasionally shift roles and functions in different ways such as information provider, counselor, planner, and evaluator. Moreover, tutors should make their expectation more explicit and encourage the overseas students' participation in classroom discussion gently.



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Penerbit Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang

Dwi Poedjiastutie

International Students' Insight: Perspective on Tutors' Role in Australia Higher Education



# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INSIGHT

## PERSPECTIVES ON TUTORS' ROLES IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION



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- (4) Setiap Orang yang memenuhi unsur sebagaimana dimaksud pada ayat (3) yang dilakukan dalam bentuk pembajakan, dipidana dengan pidana penjara paling lama 10 (sepuluh) tahun dan/atau pidana denda paling banyak Rp 4.000.000.000,00 (empat miliar rupiah).



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It is of concern that students' expectations of the teachers' roles may be different from what tutors see themselves as doing. The mismatch expectations between students and teachers can lead to unrealistic expectations and confusion for the students. This research aims at finding the students' expectations of teacher's roles in classroom teaching. In order to make discussion more manageable, the writer presents limitation of this study only on the students' expectations of teacher's roles in classroom teaching in relation with their teaching activities, assignments, and assessment process.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilized in this study in this study. The purpose of integrating two approaches was done in order to capitalize on the strengths of the two approaches and to compensate for the weaknesses of each approach. In addition, quantitative research is usually driven by the researcher's concerns, whereas qualitative research takes the subject's perspectives as the point of departure. These emphases would be brought together in this study. Questionnaires and group discussion can be employed to study perceptions. In this study, however, questionnaires are designed in order to reach as large an audience as possible and to allow the respondents to answer the research questions at their own pace and their own time.

The quantitative data that were derived from analysing fixed-choice questions showed more clear and linear result of expectations. For example: during tutorial activities, overseas students expected teacher to be planner, facilitator and information provider. In relation to the students learning and the assignments, most respondents also expected more directive roles of the teacher. In addition, the majority respondents in respect to the assessments anticipated teacher as evaluator and information provider.

In contrast, the qualitative data, which resulted from analysing focus group discussion, indicated substantial variability. The free response section allowed multiple responses and those often meant that the students' expectations did not neatly fit into the particular category. It clearly showed the respondents' expectations fall into three categories in all aspects in learning. Some respondents perceived that teacher should be responsible for all aspects of learning. Others said that both teacher and students should be responsible for all aspects in learning while another group of students believed all aspects in learning are the students' responsibility. Perhaps the contradiction in expectations can be accounted for in the responses to question on the students' prior experiences of the roles of teacher.

Respondents appeared to prefer teacher-oriented learning but a positive response to student-centred learning was expressed in response to the focus group discussion. This leaves us with an apparently contradictory view of the roles of teacher.

Students who responded to the questionnaires in this basically appreciated in active, independent learning with the role of teacher as facilitator in order to contribute and exploit their learning potential. This can be captured from their responses that they approved doing assignments independently or discussing with their peers in small groups. However, the expectations of teacher as information provider are still evidence among the students sampled. The apparent contradiction in lots of data lead to the student's ambivalence of expectations between teacher-centred and student-centred. This ambivalence may reflect confusion, perhaps from the respondents' bi-cultural experiences. The respondents are willing to embrace autonomous learning but they are not yet ready to release their prior experiences and should act totally independence.

In this occasion, the researcher would like to appreciate the feedback and criticism from very outstanding people including Dr. Anna Alderson Adjunct Professor from Murdoch University Western Australia who provides her countless supports to read and evaluate the draft and show me the different perspectives which are valuable for the improvement of this monograph. In addition to that, the group discussion lead by Dr Peter Charles Taylor from Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia, who inspired us with a lot of fruitful

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With Love  
Author,

Dwi Poedjiastutie





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# Chapter 1: Introduction

International students' experiences of study in Australia vary, as do Australian academics experiences of overseas students in their classes. This study considers one influencing factor, overseas students' expectations of their Australian teachers. This chapter will discuss the background to the question, articulate the questions, and explain how the findings will be reported.

## **A. Background of the Study**

University classrooms in Australia today are changing significantly (Cross, 2006; Le Cornu et al, 2003; Kennedy, 1995). More and more students from a variety of racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds study in Australia. However, the majority of international students at Australian universities is and will continue to be from the Asian region. The significant change has resulted from Australia and developing countries' cooperation particularly in the field of education.

The increased diversity in the student population and is one of the greatest challenges facing teachers and the students themselves and an area of difference in learning style (Howson, 2002). For example, several research papers have shown concerns about the tendency in Australian universities to refer overseas students, particularly from East Asia, as students who rely more heavily on memorization and less on understanding than their Australian counterparts (Samuelowicz, 1987: 123). University lecturers describe overseas students as rote learners who adopt a surface approach to learning (Ballard, 1987; Burke, 1986) and learn only to meet the external demands of a course or simply to be able to reproduce information (Biggs, 1987). They are said to rarely engage their critical thinking skills and tend to be passive learners (Chalmers & Volet, 1997:87).

As well, overseas students find themselves studying in situations where the learning context is different from their previous experiences. They attempt to respond to the multiplicity of responsibilities in their academic life that they might not have come across before, such as independent learning, active participation, and critical thinking. Since overseas students may have come from educational contexts that were highly directed, structured, and regulated by the teacher (Chalmers and Volet, 1997), their customary learning strategies suddenly have to be replaced by the approach with less direction and less regulation from the teacher. They may face a series of difficulties to deal with the new situation where teachers behave differently when compared with the behavior of teachers in the countries from which they have come.

Overseas students who study in Australia may come from educational contexts in which teachers may hold a belief that the teaching-learning practice is considered effective if the teachers are not negligent in their professional duties. According to Malamah-Thomas (1987: vii), teaching should be a subservient activity accountable through its effect on learning. However, if the teacher typically assumes a dominant and directive role in the classroom interaction, the result will be learning which is related to the teaching intent, not the learner.

The role of the teacher as the only powerful source of knowledge or figure of authority who decides both materials and methods of teaching is unlikely to encourage satisfying learning outcomes. As Tudor (1993:23) argues, the teaching profession has looked for the new approaches to teaching which allow students to attain their goals with less directed teacher support. This has involved a re-examination of what students can contribute to their learning and experimentation with teaching methods designed to exploit students' autonomous learning potential. Ustunloughlu, (2009) and Holec (1981), stated that the gist of learner autonomy is that a learner develops the ability to take charge of his or her own learning.

The concept of autonomy has traditionally been associated with individualism. However, autonomy does not necessarily imply total independence. As Nunan (1996:13) has said, autonomy is not an absolute concept. There are degrees of autonomy and the extent to which it is feasible or desirable for the learners to embrace autonomy will depend on a range of factors. Therefore, the learners in the process



of becoming autonomous need a teacher for a variety of reasons (Aoki, 1999). The role of the teacher in the development of learner autonomy becomes more one of facilitator, counselor, and resource person rather than the direct provider of knowledge. According to Voller (1997) cited in Aoki (1999), both facilitator and counselor provide psychological and technical support. The difference between the two is that the former mostly works with groups and the latter in one-to-one situations. Psychological support refers to caring for and motivating learners, as well as raising learners' awareness. Technical support refers to helping learners to plan and carry out their learning, to evaluate themselves, and to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to plan, implement, and evaluate their learning.

Teachers may be expected to provide support in a range of ways. Teachers nowadays should be perceived not only as resource persons but also as controller, assessor, organizer, prompter, or even as participant, depending to large extent on the function they perform in different activities in order to promote students' overall development in learning (Harmer, 1991).

The teachers' roles as resource persons or figures of authority focus on a control orientation which directs what students should learn, how long they should spend on doing assignments, and what target students should achieve. The teachers' role as facilitator focuses on an autonomy orientation by which she/he acts as a low-profile figure to facilitate the students' learning achievement.

Research by Deci and Ryan (1985) has shown that if teachers have an autonomy orientation rather than a control orientation, their students will demonstrate greater intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. Thus, an autonomy orientation supports the perception of self-determination and promotes willingness to learn.

I believe that the teaching learning process and a control or autonomy orientation reflect the cultural traits and traditions that the students bring to the classroom. As Thanasoulas (1999) stated, in some cultures, students tend to feel more at ease in the classroom expressing their viewpoints of agreement and disagreement. In others, a passive attitude toward the teachers and the target language is more common.

Tudor (1992) argues that language teaching is a complex cultural activity influenced by the learner. The teacher needs to understand students within their socio-cultural context, quite apart from accepting them as psychologically complex individuals. A wide range of factors merit consideration in this respect. No teaching method will work unless the teacher recognizes differences in the social and cultural backgrounds that have shaped overseas students' attitudes. If, for example, students come from a culture where the teacher is seen as a figure of authority, the attempt to share the decision making with the students might be seen as an abdication of responsibility (Tudor, 1993:28). Moreover, the encounter with different expectations of Australian teachers by students who come from a socio-cultural context where regurgitation from memory is dominant, can cause students shock and anxiety (Nixon, 1993).

## **B. Rationale of the Study**

There has been considerable recent research on university lecturers' conception of their roles (Burrough-Lange, 1996; Dall' Alba, 1990; Samuelowics & Bain, 1992) but relatively little attention has been given to the roles of tutors from the students' point of view. Related research on the students' perceptions of learning environments (Clarke, 1995 and 1998) has tried to establish a link between different learning environments and the teachers' behavior. However, what have not specifically and in detail been investigated are the teachers' roles in the tutorial environment. It is commonly said that the tutorial is one learning environment which not only provides the students with the greater chance to interact, but also to be in a different relationship with the tutors. However, in tutorials, overseas students might feel intimidated or embarrassed if the tutor pushes them too hard in participation.

Much research also has been carried out on the behavior of Asian students when studying abroad (Ballard & Clanchy, 1982 and 1984; Baker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991; Burns, 1991). But what is relatively ignored is the students' feeling of apprehension when tutors behave differently when compared with the behavior of teachers in countries from which the overseas students have come. This apprehension may be related in part to the students' expectations of the tutors' roles.

To enhance students' learning and to facilitate understanding between teachers and students, especially students from overseas, more needs to be known of the students' perceptions of the roles of teachers in Australian tertiary institutions. Such data could, then, be incorporated into tertiary teaching training, hopefully leading to the amelioration of some of the present areas of difficulty experienced by overseas students in adapting to Australian tertiary education.

This study is, therefore, intended to investigate students' perceptions of the roles of tutors in Australian tertiary education. If there is a difference between tutors' perceptions of their role and the students' perceptions of it, identifying this gap may reduce the difficulties overseas students face. The study will attempt to determine students' expectations of tutors, as these are fundamental to the shape of their perceptions.

### **C. The Research Problem**

The present study aims to investigate the answers to one major problem namely: What are the overseas students' perceptions of the roles of tutors in Australian universities?

There are two aspects related to research problems that the writer needs to clarify to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding. First, there are several modes of learning in Australian universities. The Large Group Lecture is a lecture where there are more than twenty-five students (Clarke, 1998). In this mode of teaching, a lecturer presents material mostly in lecture form. This involves little interaction between teacher and student. The other most common type of learning environment is tutorials/seminars where there are fewer than 25 students. There are still other modes of learning environment such as practical settings on campus and off campus, and one-to-one learning situations.

In this study the focus is on the seminar/tutorial. This type of learning offers a group size with the potential to promote a personal, informal atmosphere which fosters learning, allows questions to be asked and encourages interaction between teacher and student and between one student and another (Clarke, 1998)

Secondly, the terms "teacher", "lecturer", "tutor", and "academic staff" are used interchangeably by several researchers to refer to university teachers (see Clifford, 1999, Burroughs-Lange, 1996, Prosser

& Trigwell, 1997). Burroughs (1996), for example, refers to a lecturer as someone who has held teaching positions at various levels, conducted large lectures, small class work, and had some connection with fieldwork and professional practice (1996:30). However, Page & Thomas (1978: 203, 337, 348) differentiate the terms “teacher” and “lecturer” but not “lecturer” and “tutor”. According to these writers, a lecturer is someone who holds a teaching position in further education and higher education, who instructs through lecture and seminar and tutorial techniques. A tutor is a college or university teacher teaching a single student or a small group; while a teacher is a person who is employed by a primary or secondary school to teach.

Specifically, in the Australian context, the terms, “lecturer” and “tutor” are used differently based on different learning environments. A lecturer is a university teacher who holds a large class with more than 25 students and usually employs one-way communication. A tutor is also a university teacher who handles a small group of students, less than 25, and allows greater interaction among the students themselves and between students and tutor. Since those terms carry significantly different meaning, the term “tutor” will be used consistently in this study to refer to a person who is in charge of tutorials. This study tries to identify the international students’ perceptions of the roles of tutors in Australian universities.

## **D. The Importance of the Study**

In general, it is hoped that the results of this study will give a base for bridging gaps between tutors’ expectations of the overseas students and the overseas students’ expectations of tutors at tertiary level, particularly in Australia. It is of concern that students’ perceptions of the tutors’ roles may be different from what tutors see themselves as doing. The mismatch perceptions between overseas students and tutors can lead to unrealistic expectations of and confusion for the students. By understanding the students’ perceptions, it may shed light on why they do not perform as Australian tutors expect them to.

Furthermore, this study is expected to assist tutors who are working with an ethnically mixed population. Hopefully, it will highlight some common myths and stereotypes that relate to various cultural and ethnic groups, as it is known that Australia and other English-speaking

countries have become the main destination of students who come from a variety of racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds (Howson, 2002; Marginson, 2001; Pearson, 1999).

### **E. Limitations**

Due to the limited time and the scope of the research, the questionnaires used to seek answers to the question raised were distributed only to International students enrolled for Master Degree at the School of Education Curtin University. As a cross validation instrument, the writer also invited international students who are enrolled at Curtin University Bentley Campus to join group discussions.

### **F. The Organization of this Study**

The next chapter will review of relevant research literature in order to provide the readers with the theoretical bases underlying this study. The research design, the respondents, the data collection, and the data analysis will appear in chapter three. Chapter four will present the readers with the research findings, while chapter five discusses the findings. Finally, chapter six will close this study with conclusions and recommendations.



# Glossary

**Assignment:** is a set of tasks assigned to students by their teachers to be completed outside the class. Common homework assignments may include required reading, a writing or typing project, mathematical exercises to be completed, information to be reviewed before a test, or other skills to be practiced.

**Autonomous Learning:** Autonomy means the ability to take control of one's own learning, independently or in collaboration with others. An autonomous learner will take more responsibility for learning and is likely to be more effective than a learner who is reliant on the teacher.

**Classroom interaction:** is a practice that enhances the development of the two very important language skills which are speaking and listening among the learners. Classroom Interaction aims at meaningful communication among the students and or students and teacher in their target language.

**Cultural background:** means the group from which you descend and that shares a distinct identity.

**Expectation:** is event that considered the most likely to happen. An expectation, which is a belief that is centered on the future, may or may not be realistic.

**Evaluator:** someone whose job is to judge the quality, importance, amount, or value of something.

**Facilitator:** A facilitator is someone who engages in facilitation—any activity that makes a social process easy or easier.

**Independent learning:** or Independent study, is a form of education offered by many high schools, colleges, and other educational institutions. It is sometimes referred to as directed study, and is an educational activity undertaken by an individual with little to no supervision.

**International Student:** are students who chose to undertake all or part of their tertiary education in a country other than their own and move to that country for the purpose of studying.

**Learning context:** is defined as the situation in which something is learned or understood, a situation that can impact how something is learned or what is taught.

**Lecturer:** is an academic rank within many universities, though the meaning of the term varies somewhat from country to country.

**Passive learners:** is a method of learning or instruction where students receive information from the instructor and internalize it, and "where the learner receives no feedback from the instructor". The term is often used together with direct instruction and lecturing, with passive learning being the result or intended outcome of the instruction. This style of learning is teacher-centered and contrasts to active learning.

**Perception:** (from the Latin perceptio) is the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the presented information, or the environment.

**Tertiary education:** is the educational level following the completion of a school providing a secondary education. The World Bank, for example, defines tertiary education as including universities as well as trade schools and colleges. Higher education is taken to include undergraduate and postgraduate education

**Tutor(s):** A tutor, formally also called an academic tutor, is a person who provides assistance or tutelage to one or more people on certain subject areas or skills. The tutor spends a few hours on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis to transfer their expertise on the topic or skill to the student.

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